

Some folks collect coins, Joe prefers Caruso, Scampini

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Section E Page One

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Some people collect coins. Others collect stamps or butterflies. Joe Siciliano collects records, opera records to be exact.

He owns about 6,000 discs. Among them are recordings of about 200 complete operas, most by Italian composers. His collection includes some 2,800, 78-rpm records. The oldest is a recording by tenor Enrico Caruso made by Victrola in 1902. In fact, he has about 200 original Caruso recordings. He plays them on a 1913 Victrola phonograph manufactured in 1913.

Mr. Siciliano is a man one would refer to politely as an opera aficionado. In less refined terminology, he is an opera nut.

Why?

"When I was a youngster," Mr. Siciliano recalls, "instead of going out on Saturdays to play, my father would pull me by the arm and say, 'Hey. Listen to this.'"

"This" was the weekly Metropolitan Opera radio broadcast.

His father also owned recordings of Caruso.

"Keep in mind that every first generation Italian had a collection of Caruso recordings. (Mr. Siciliano's father, also named Joe, emigrated from Italy to Utah in 1914.)

"First generation Italians naturally followed anything Italian. Opera is Italian. That's where opera got started. He (Joe Sr.) had a collection of Caruso recordings and a couple of complete operas on 78 rpm records — 'Pagliacci,' 'La Traviata.' There was no television at that time. It was strictly music. I really got the interest in opera from him.

"He would take me to the old San Carlo Opera Company. They were a traveling opera group from California that would come to the Salt Lake Valley in the mid-'30s. I would go to all those performances."

When one asks Mr. Siciliano why he prefers opera to, say, the symphony or chamber music, he answers simply, "I like the human voice. Opera, of course, is drama put to music. I love vocal sounds. It moves me."

It moves him so much, in fact, that he has amassed a collection so large it probably would take years of spare-time listening just to hear everything once.

Why so many records?

"Once you get started in a hobby, it's difficult to draw a line and say, 'This is it.' It's like the millionaire who makes the first million. He doesn't want to stop at the first million. He wants to keep on going until he gets two, three, four million and so on.

"I'm not still collecting, simply because I can't afford it. I occasionally will buy a record if it's a particular voice, for example, that I want in my collection, or if it's a new Verdi recording. Something like that I'll get. But just to be buying, no.

His favorite composer is Verdi; his favorite works are "Otello" and the Requiem.

"Verdi wrote for the human voice like no other opera composer. Certainly Wagner did not write for the human voice. His music is mythical, his orchestration is fantastic, but he didn't have the human voice in mind when he wrote his operas.

"There are some interesting things available I'd like to have. Gigli (tenor Beniamino Gigli, 1890-1957) made about 380 records. I have about 325. I would like to have all of his records. I'd like to have all of Caruso's, but that's an impossibility. The costs would be too high.

"But you have to keep in mind that these records are valuable only to a collector. I have picked a lot of these up at the Salvation Army, a few in garbage cans. The most I think I ever paid for a 78 rpm record was \$7.50."

Mr. Siciliano said he gets telephone calls regularly from local people who have a Caruso recording and automatically assume it is valuable. Many, like recordings of "O sole mio" are not, simply because so many were made.

French Label

Mr. Siciliano's most valuable recording is a 14-inch diameter disc produced by the French Pathe label in 1905. On it, a tenor named Augusto

Scampini performs excerpts from "Il Trovatore." The record probably would bring between \$50 and \$100 from another collector if Mr. Siciliano wanted to sell it. He found the record in an antique shop.

"Bellini, had he lived to be the same age as Verdi (Bellini died at 35, Verdi at 87), who knows what he would have written? As far as melody alone goes, Bellini is very hard to beat. I would take Verdi, Bellini, Puccini, in that order, as my favorites for opera."

Mr. Siciliano owns recorded versions of every Verdi opera which has been recorded.

When he listens to an opera recording, he listens for voice quality and interpretation. The quality of sound reproduction is of little importance to him. He overlooks the scratchiness of old recordings.

"I can put on some of these old recordings and the layperson will say, 'Gad, that's noisy and scratchy.' They've completely missed the point. That's immaterial.

"When I listen to music I'm not listening for sound. I'm not a stereo bug. I'm listening to the music and I'm listening to the voice. When I listen to the old 78 rpm records, I could care less how noisy they are."

Modern Singers

Mr. Siciliano values interpretation. He feels that most modern singers are "awful." There are exceptions, he said, and he includes Luciano Pavarotti among them.

"I hate to always refer to the past, but you go

back to the me of Caruso, Gigli, the baritones like Ruffo, they were singers simply because they studied for years. They knew what to sing. In addition to having a voice, they knew what they were singing about. That's where the interpretation comes in. Today you may have a beautiful voice, but they don't say anything."

Nonetheless, Mr. Siciliano still listens to the Saturday Metropolitan Opera broadcasts when he gets a chance.

"It moves me."



Joe Siciliano places arm of 1913 Victrola phonograph on one of his many 78 rpm opera recordings. The old phonograph runs fine.